

## Montgomery RTV has promise, but needs lanes and money

by [Dan Reed](#) • August 13, 2012 1:30 pm

Last Wednesday, residents who studied bus rapid transit in Montgomery County talked about their findings [at a forum](#) in Silver Spring hosted by the [Coalition for Smarter Growth](#). They stressed how important transit is to the county's future, but to succeed, the system will need dedicated lanes and reliable funding.

Composed of residents, community leaders and major landowners, the [Transit Task Force](#) was set up by County Executive Ike Leggett to give recommendations on how to build a countywide transit system dubbed RTV, for "Rapid Transit Vehicle."

In May, they released [this report](#), concluding that a 16-line, 148-mile network of rapid bus routes would reduce congestion and provide new development opportunities. It builds on previous studies by [planning consultants Parsons Brinckerhoff](#) and an earlier proposal by County Councilmember Marc Elrich.

### Not your typical bus

Unlike traditional bus service, RTV stations would be distinctive and covered, with real-time information for when the next one was coming and off-board fare collection. Stops would be between a half-mile and a mile apart, while buses would run frequently throughout the day. The buses themselves would be sleek, attractive and level with the station platform, allowing riders with limited mobility to get on and off more easily.

Meanwhile, Metrobus and the county's Ride On bus service would be restructured. New "feeder buses" would collect riders in neighborhoods and deliver them to rapid transit stations, reducing the need for park-and-ride lots.

When finished, the RTV system could receive between 165,000 and 207,000 riders each day, though the task force was realistic about changing transportation habits. "We don't

expect to get half the people out of their cars, but even if a small percentage do, it'll make a big difference," said Tina Slater, task force member and president of the Action Committee for Transit.

Francine Waters, representing Lerner Enterprises on the task force, talked about the development potential of RTV. Lines would connect research and development centers like the Great Seneca Science Corridor with the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda and the Food and Drug Administration in White Oak, creating a "science and health triangle."

Lerner is one of several developers is remaking White Flint as a new urban center. They hope to transform Rockville Pike into a grand boulevard, complete with special, protected lanes for buses. RTV is about "[providing] different levels of mobility," she said, making it easier for people to get around with or without a car.

### **Need for dedicated lanes**

However, it's unclear whether the rest of the system will look like Rockville Pike. The Task Force chose not to look at where dedicated lanes would go, saying it required "block by block" solutions that were best considered during a future design phase. "The construction may be the simplest part," said Winston. "The sorting out of these issues will be extremely complicated."

Adding new lanes for transit could be prohibitively expensive, but county officials are reluctant to give existing lanes to buses. Parsons Brinckerhoff's study assumed that much of the system wouldn't have dedicated lanes at all.

"Some places you won't be able to take anything away," said Dan Wilhelm, task force representative from the Montgomery County Civic Federation.

As *GGW*'s Dan Malouff wrote last month, that could be the undoing of Montgomery County's transit plans. A transit lane can carry more people than a normal car lane.

According to Wilhelm, 3 car lanes can carry about 4,000 people per hour. Replace one of them with a dedicated bus lane, and capacity can increase to 10,000 people, depending on how frequent the buses are. With 3 car lanes and a bus lane, a street can carry as many as 18,000 people per hour.

This is especially relevant to the county's downtowns, like Bethesda and Silver Spring, where there's a lot of congestion that can slow buses down but no room to widen streets. Taking away lanes from cars in these areas will be politically unpopular, but giving them to buses is the only way to ensure that the rapid transit system is fast and reliable. Otherwise, riders will be reluctant to use the system, making it less effective while traffic gets worse.

### **Questions about funding scheme**

The task force estimates that the RTV system could cost \$1.8 billion to build and \$1.1 million each year to operate. They've proposed dividing it into 3 phases to be built over 20 years. Funding would likely come from a combination of state and local sources.

The county could borrow money to build the system and use the proceeds from a special taxing district along with some state funds to pay it off over time, in an arrangement similar to the 30/10 initiative being used by Los Angeles to pay for a massive transit expansion.

"This will last a long time and can be paid for over a long time," said Winston.

Some audience members were skeptical about that arrangement, which would tax residents and businesses within a half-mile of the proposed routes. Jim Zepp, Silver Spring resident and member of the Montgomery County Civic Federation, asked whether the system benefitted long-distance commuters from Frederick and Howard counties at the expense of those who lived next to a RTV line. "It's not Smart Growth," he said.

Winston suggested residents shouldn't "take a narrow view" of who will benefit from the service. "Even if I don't live near the service, I still benefit in a variety of direct and indirect ways," he said.

The task force warned that not improving the county's transportation system wasn't an option. Montgomery County already loses money to congestion, Wilhelm noted, due to wasted fuel and higher labor costs, which result in a higher cost for doing business here. Meanwhile, the county is losing jobs while surrounding areas continue to add them. There's room for over 160,000 new jobs in Montgomery County under current plans, but even without them, turnover from retirements and an influx of new workers means traffic will still be an issue.

"Burying our heads in the sand about creating additional transportation assets is not the solution," said Winston. "We need to do this even if we don't create all these new jobs, and especially if we do."

Next up, the Planning Department will take a look at the rapid transit proposal and make further refinements. County planners have already made changes to the system outlined by the Task Force, removing lines that were unlikely to get a lot of riders while extending others that might be more popular. According to planner Larry Cole, they may have a report of their own by October.